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SUBJECT: VATICAN: LOOKING AHEAD ON BIOTECH

REF: A. A) ROME 2543,

[1](#)B. 05 ROME 2543, 03 VAT 4859; 03 ROME 5205; 04 VAT 3810

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Political Officer, POL, STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Recent conversations between Holy See officials and USAID and EB representatives visiting the Vatican confirmed the cautious acceptance of biotech food by the Holy See. Vatican officials asserted that the safety and science of genetically modified foods would eventually be non-issues at the Holy See. Preoccupation at the Vatican, they said, was tied more to economic arguments, as some fear that widespread use of GMO food in the developing world would subjugate its farmer population and become a form of economic imperialism simply serving to enrich multi-national corporations. There remains vocal opposition among some Catholic laypeople and clergy to biotech food, and signs are not strong that the papacy or other Vatican entities with which Post has worked are ready to issue a stronger endorsement of these technologies. However, by focusing on the economic benefits of GMO food for developing-world farmers, safeguards in place to prevent economic exploitation, and ongoing research on non-cash crops such as cassava, Post will continue to engage the Holy See on what we have called the "moral imperative" of biotech food. A Vatican document on world hunger planned for drafting this fall offers another opening for our work on the issue and a chance to influence a wide segment of the population in Europe and the developing world.

USG, Holy See Officials Meet

[1](#)2. (SBU) Michael Hall, Biotechnology Advisor for USAID's Regional Economic Development Services Office in Nairobi, met with Monsignor James Reinert of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (J and P), and Jack Bobo, Deputy Chief, EB/TPP/ABT/BTT, met with Fr. Michael Osborn of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, offering a chance to push the Vatican on biotech issues, and an opportunity for Post to analyze the current state of play on biotech in the Vatican generally. Both meetings took place at the Vatican. J and P takes the official lead on biotech issues at the Vatican, and has been quite active in recent years, often working closely with Post (03 VAT 4859; 03 ROME 5205; 04 VAT 3810). Cor Unum, the Vatican's clearinghouse for aid efforts worldwide, is another potential ally on biotech, as food aid to the developing world is a great part of its brief.

Science and Safety not the Problem

[1](#)3. (SBU) Discussing the climate on biotech foods at the Vatican, Osborn assured Bobo that doubts about the safety and the legitimacy of the science of these technologies would not be a long-term problem in efforts to bring the Holy See further along on biotech. He noted that the Holy See did not feel that the genetic modification of plants posed any moral problem. Osborn mentioned a few clerical and other critics who had spoken out at Post's biotech conference last year co-sponsored by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (04 VAT 3810), raising the alarm about the alleged dire effects of biotech food on health and the environment. "You're going to have a few people who continue to use scare tactics about the science," Osborn said, "but little by little, they will cease to be a factor." Within the Vatican, he said, the mainstream opinion is that the science is solid. Bobo filled Osborn in on recent studies that backed up this view, and directed him to a recent World Health Organization (WHO) report that found: "GM foods currently available on the international market have passed risk assessments and are not likely to, nor have been shown to, present risks for human health." The report is available in English, French, and Spanish at:
http://www.who.int/foodsafety/biotech/who_stu_dy/en/index.html.

14. (SBU) According to Osborn, the main issue for the Church will continue to be the economic angle of biotech food. Many in the Church fear that these technologies are going to make developing-world farmers more dependent on others, and simply serve to enrich multi-national corporations. In his

conversation with Reinert, Hall also acknowledged this concern, but noted that some researchers were working on crops such as cowpeas and cassava that were unlikely to make big profits, but could benefit the developing world. Bobo pointed out to Osborn that competition between companies and the regulatory process in individual countries provided some safeguards on these issues. Poloff mentioned presentations given at Post's conference showing that in several communities in various parts of the developing world, the advent of biotech crops had brought significant economic benefits for developing-world farmers. While seed companies had made some profits, the big losers appeared to have been multi-national pesticide companies. Describing several examples of his group's projects, Hall assured Reinert that USAID initiatives sought to empower Africans and address their needs rather than blindly promote U.S. interests.

Opposition Still Active

15. (SBU) Post notes that Catholic opposition to biotech food is still active. Elements of the Catholic population, primarily in the English-speaking world, peppered the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and J and P with hostile emails when they moved forward on the issue in the past two years. The UK-based anti-GMO Catholic Institute for International Relations has been very active on the issue, as well, often through the influential English Catholic magazine, the Tablet. (In fact a letter from a CIIR member in the July 30 Tablet made questionable assertions attacking biotech.) Reinert said that many clergy, especially those working in the developing world, continued to be anti-biotech, though many seemed uninformed about the science. He pointed to the Philippines as a country with a particularly anti-GMO Catholic hierarchy, joking that the Filipino Church would "go into schism" if the Vatican came out any stronger for biotech food.

Comment: Next Steps

16. (C) By word and action the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences have established the Holy See as giving at least a cautious go-ahead to bioengineered foods. It may be difficult to get much more in the near future. The pope has not shown his cards on the issue, but some feel he may have been influenced by European prejudices against biotech food. Further, before the papal transition, J and P sent a document laying out a moral/theological case for biotech food to the pope's old curial dicastery for clearance -- the theological watchdog Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). For whatever reason, the document never came back from CDF. What's more, Post's greatest ally at the Vatican on the question, Cardinal Renato Martino of J and P, may be through pushing the issue. A Martino deputy told us recently that the cardinal had cooperated with Embassy Vatican on biotech over the past two years in part to compensate for his vocal disapproval of the Iraq war and its aftermath -- to keep relations with the USG smooth. According to our source, Martino no longer feels the need to take this approach.

17. (C) Despite these less encouraging signs, opportunities exist to press the issue with the Vatican, and in turn to influence a wide segment of the population in Europe and the developing world. According to Osborn, Cor Unum will be taking the lead this fall on the updating of a Holy See document on world hunger. In light of recent work that has been done on the subject, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' 2003-04 State of Food and Agriculture report that gave a cautious backing to the use of biotech food for the developing world, it will be difficult for the Holy See to avoid the issue. We will continue to press the "moral imperative" of biotech, publicizing and sharing data that show the economic benefit of these technologies to farmers, and explaining the safeguards that exist to prevent economic exploitation. Sharing information on research on non-cash crops such as cassava will also be important to winning Vatican hearts and minds.

SANDROLINI